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Handling and Preventing Journalistic Fraud: Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass, Jayson Blair

Kenneth Munson

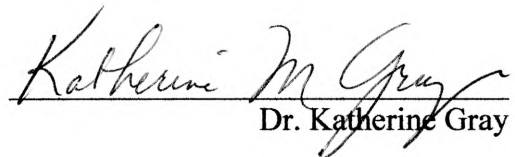
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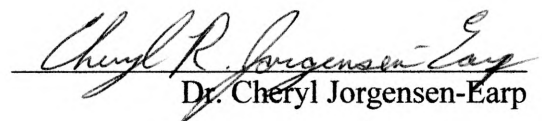
May 2006

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to Dr. Michael Robinson.

Dr. Michael Robinson, Committee Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to Dr. Katherine Gray.

Dr. Katherine Gray

A handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to Dr. Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp.

Dr. Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp

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Abstract

Fraud is a growing concern in the news business, especially in recent years where numerous journalism scandals rock its foundation. This paper examines the most prominent cases: Stephen Glass, the reporter for *The New Republic* newsmagazine who completely or partially fabricated 27 stories in the late '90s; Jayson Blair, the *New York Times* reporter who was found to have plagiarized or made up his supposedly on-the-scene reporting in 2003; and Janet Cooke, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1981 for her *Washington Post* story about a child heroin addict who, in actuality, did not exist. This paper will examine flaws in fact-checking and the excessive amount of trust that led all of these prominent journalism institutions to let itself and its readers be fooled by fraudulent reporters. It will also determine the causes of these notable deceptions have any common features.

Introduction

At first glance, dealing with fraudulent journalists would seem to be the most basic of ethical problems. Unlike such other ethical issues as biased reporting, media pressures or invasion of privacy, there is no question as to the morality of fabrication in journalism: It is wrong and it is unethical. The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics addresses this in its preamble: "The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues" ("Society"). Other relevant passages include, "Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is

never permissible," and "Never plagiarize" ("Society"). Fabrication, whether it be plagiarism or invention of facts, is generally agreed to be unacceptable (Hirst 258).

Plagiarism, at its root, is cheating (Bugeja 167). It is distinct from other forms of fraud, such as invention, which is creating facts from whole cloth, or copyright infringement, which does include plagiarism but also an array of other offenses (Bugeja 168). Because plagiarism is intensely embarrassing and potentially damaging for both the media outlet and the writer, as well as opening the threat of lawsuits, it is to be avoided at all costs (Bugeja 168).

Much has been written on the scandals of Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair. Many books on media ethics use the cases to illustrate a larger point about journalism. However, such mentions are generally restricted to brief summaries of events and do not go in depth. Each of the scandals has been separately analyzed by numerous commentators; however, not many are in refereed journals and do not seem to be thoroughly reached. In addition, analysts have often come to completely different conclusions about what went wrong and what should be done in these cases. While the three names are often linked, none deal with all three together or attempt to find parallels between the cases, beyond a quick name-drop in articles about broad issues.

First-hand reports from the fraudulent reporters have been derided as self-serving excuses for their ethical lapses. The editors in question have also been guilty of downplaying their failures, playing up the scandals as amazing feats against which there was no possible defense (Shaw).

There are ways for catching such a problem before it happens and for dealing with it when it does. One way is for astute editors to become suspicious when quotes fit

together too well, which is how former *Boston Globe* columnist Patricia Smith was found to have invented quotes (Christians 71). Another way is for readers to offer their comments when they suspect something amiss, and for editors to respond to these comments based on how valid they consider such complaints. This is the way that many newspapers choose to deal with these issues when they arise; in fact, this is how the *New York Times* chose to handle these same problems for most of its history (Getlin).

The most often-suggested way for newspapers to catch mistakes and serious flaws in procedure are ombudsmen. Ombudsmen have different roles depending on the newspaper: sometimes they work independently on a temporary basis to assess the state of the newspaper and the validity of any complaints, while others have permanent roles as intermediaries between the newspaper's staff and its readers (Getlin). Some answer to the newspaper's editor; other times they report directly to the publisher (Bugeja 240). Many newspapers do not have these; some believe, as the *New York Times* did for many years, that the matter should simply be dealt with by other means (Getlin). Others simply opt out because they have other financial priorities (Getlin). Ombudsmen notably have only the power to criticize, and do not have the ability to affect changes by themselves (Klaidman 228). Still, many in the field of journalism see ombudsmen as a key part of establishing credibility for news outlets; however, as of early 2004, there were only 40 news ombudsmen working in the United States, a number that has stayed fairly constant throughout the decade (Dorroh). Critics have contended that the failure of many newspapers to hire ombudsmen shows a lack of willingness to admit the fallibility of their own institution (Bugeja 241).

There are already a few hard-tested guidelines for dealing with potentially fraudulent reporters. The first is to deal with the offending reporter or columnist immediately, either by suspending them until the full truth can be discovered or by firing them or forcing them to resign; in any case, their work should be kept out of the newspaper until the crisis has blown over (Campbell). The next is to inform the staff as much as can be allowed (Campbell). While there is debate about how much the crisis should be made public (it can depend largely on the severity of the ethical lapse), the decision should be made with the knowledge that the public may well pay more attention to the publication's reaction to the crime than the crime itself (Campbell). These are vague guidelines because there is not a whole lot of agreement on how to deal with such an emergency (Campbell).

Literature Review

Key to the study of deception in journalism is an understanding of what qualifies as deception, and what qualifies as morally unjustifiable deception, specifically in these cases informative deception. An omission of the fact that the subject of an article is gay is not deception if the subject's homosexuality is not important to the story and does not give an inaccurate impression (Elliott). Not mentioning that a rescued kidnapping victim was sexually molested does count as deception because it is an omission that considerably alters a reader's understanding of the story; however, it is justifiable in order to protect the privacy and well-being of the victim (Elliott). Other forms of deception, like hiding the biases of a clearly biased source in order to lend credibility to a source, are not morally justifiable because they only serve the paper and not the public.

Because plagiarism is easily accepted as unethical, many newspapers do not have any policy on plagiarism. Many editors assume that all reporters understand that plagiarism is unethical and not to be tolerated, and that even the newest staff member understands this (Berger). However, major uproar over plagiarism often compels editors to make memos and meetings that go over the unwritten guidelines on the topic (Berger). Furthermore, many reporters see it as an easy, if costly, mistake to make, and a typical response would be to express sympathy for the offending writer (Bugeja 169).

While some reporters may believe that plagiarism is an easy mistake, one must also recognize the problems it causes for the writer, with laziness or carelessness not being an excuse. As one writer put it, “journalists must hold themselves to high standards,” because, after all, a journalist without credibility is worth nothing (Bugeja 170). Indeed, while unintentional plagiarism is often seen as a lesser crime than outright plagiarism, it is still considered a crime (Klaidman 24).

While plagiarism is a well-covered topic in most texts, coverage for fabrication is comparatively sparse, and journalists are generally not trained to deal with it (Bugeja 130). At the same time, however, they are expected to deal with it, as plagiarism can do considerable harm to the credibility of both the writer and the writer’s news outlet (Bugeja 130).

The views of journalistic fraud have evolved considerably from the beginnings of American journalism in the first half of the 19th century. One of the most famous and successful newspaper hoaxes in history, the Moon Hoax of 1835, managed to convince its readers that teeming and vast amounts of life were found on Earth’s moon (Thornton). However, while the majority of readers still felt that truth was the highest ideal of

journalism, they were not notably outraged (Thornton). Of the editorials about the hoax, less than half were negative. Furthermore, it boosted the circulation of the paper in question (Thornton). However, the penny papers of the time were viewed as “entertaining but untrustworthy,” very much unlike the newspaper of today (Thornton). Further historical studies (roughly spanning the years from 1850 to 1950) have shown that early journalists often acted illegally and unethically in order to get a story, invading privacy and baselessly destroying reputations (Fedler). Among the stated reasons for this unethical behavior were the pressures from competition and from supervisors, loyalty to the editors, and different ethical standards of the time period (Fedler).

The public attitude towards media ethics is no longer indifferent, as evidenced by the reactions to recent fabrications. Part of the transition to high journalistic standards is the increased emphasis on professionalism, which was partially fostered by journalistic trade magazines of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Cronin). These trade magazines led the call for journalistic standards, as well as schools and colleges devoted to journalism (Cronin).

One of the unethical decisions that led to Janet Cooke’s downfall was the falsification of her resume. Roland E. Kidwell’s analysis of this deception, along with other notable cases involving lying on resumes, concluded that it was a method of “dishonest impression management,” one that does serious damage to both the individual and institution in question. Because resumes are the first real contact that potential employees will have with their employers, Kidwell writes, the resume is crucial in getting a positive reaction from employers. The negative reaction to these cases also shows that

“padding” a resume, despite being perceived as common, is still heavily frowned upon and cause harm to reputations.

These scandals have damaged the reputation of journalists considerably because the public holds news sources in high standards. Studies have shown that, while reducing journalistic standards to increase profit has proven successful in increasing revenue in the short-run, there is also evidence that reader loyalty is increased among more ethically run newspapers (Blankenburg). The numerous recent media scandals have shown that the failure of the press to live up to these standards has decreased respect for the profession. Coleman and Wilkins, citing Voakes, notes that while journalists cite laws and official policies as their guiding ethical motivations, the general public perceives journalists as being motivated by "competition and journalistic norms." Coleman and Wilkins's study showed that journalists scored higher on making ethical decisions than the average adult. Journalists also scored higher on questions concerning journalism than on other fields, suggesting that either they hold themselves to very high standards in their own profession, or that they are less comfortable in dealing with ethics questions in fields outside of journalism – and as journalists, it is important to note, they may frequently have to cover stories outside their fields of expertise (Coleman).

The same study also had some negative results for journalists, finding that roughly a quarter of the journalists surveyed scored well below the average adult, and some of those journalists scores were not only below the average adult but also roughly equal to the average prison inmate (Coleman). Coleman concluded that teachers of journalism ethics need to teach not only ethical decisions but important ethical principles that connect with those decisions. Despite this criticism of teaching methods in colleges,

journalists with college degrees have been shown to have rated higher on ethical decision-making than have journalists without degrees. (Valenti)

Critics have also taken aim at the methods of teaching ethics to journalism students (Hanson). Hanson, quoting Medgser, writes that newsroom supervisors and recruiters expressed low opinions of journalism teachers, and that other critics have found a large disconnect between the perception of ethics in the journalism classrooms and the perception in actual newsrooms. Case studies are popular ways of teaching ethics, but some critics have said that they rely on knowing values and ethics that students have not had the time or experience to develop (Hanson). While some critics take aim at the classroom, others assert that the newsroom is an inappropriate place to learn ethics, where socialization may prevent the successful learning of proper ethical behavior (Hanson). Lee, quoting Bowers, concluded that journalistic ethics were learned on the job rather than being already known innately. Hanson's study showed that students and news managers differed on several key issues, including the appropriate place to learn ethics, and the impact of business considerations in ethical decisions. Furthermore, he found that students found internships and media jobs for college students to give them very little ethical training.

Part of the problem in teaching ethics is that many journalism programs teach ethics entirely as a list of behaviors which journalists are not allowed to do (Richardson). Richardson theorizes that it makes journalists "hate and fear ethics," and instead offers that ethics should be taught as something affirmative. He also offers that it should be taught as a system that can be applied to ethical situations, one that is completely integrated with being a good journalist, and that it be completely definitive: i.e. a system

with "right and wrong answers." Doing so, according to Richardson, would provide journalists with a moral framework rather than just a system of limits on their behaviors.

Brislin suggests an alternate method of developing a workable ethical system for journalists, by adapting the Just War Doctrine for the media. Brislin rejected certain components of the doctrine, Probability of Success and Comparative Justice, when applied to journalism. However, he found that the principles of Just Cause, Competent Authority, Proportionality and Last Resort were very applicable to journalism. Just Cause (having legitimate justification for a decision) in particular was found to be useful, as it eliminated *post hoc* reasoning from the equation. Brislin also noted that any ethical framework is there to provide not concrete decisions, but concrete criteria for making ethical decisions, and that actions can be put through the criteria under different circumstances and find different conclusions.

Part of the difficulty in fulfilling the principle of truth for journalists is the occasional need for deception in order to uncover the truth. While deception in journalism is usually understood to involve hidden cameras and undercover work, news audiences can also deliberately deceive their audience (Lee).

Other factors may affect unethical decisions. Lee found that different ethical studies found contradictory information concerning the effect of the size of the institution on questionable journalism practices. Some found that larger institutions were more likely to bend on ethical decisions, while other studies found the opposite. Lee also found that studies show that publications with ombudsmen were more likely to make careful ethical decisions. Lee also found that television journalists were more likely to support deception in order to uncover news than journalists in other media.

Lee's study found that higher levels of competitiveness in the media field led to more tolerance of deception, both towards sources and towards audiences, and that deception may increase audience size for a short while but decrease it after the institution's integrity has been significantly damaged. The study also found that, while television journalists were more likely to tolerate deception, the increased emphasis on visuals in the print journalism world were beginning to cause more tolerance of deception in that medium as well.

Lee also made a distinction between journalists who believed their job was to interpret the news and mobilize the public, and those who considered their job merely to disseminate information in a timely fashion. While Lee theorized that disseminating journalists might conceivably fabricate sources and deceive their readers in order to meet deadlines, his study found that crusader journalists were more likely to tolerate deception in order to meet their goals. Among Lee's other findings were that journalists are influenced to act ethically or cautiously because of fear of lawsuits; that U.S. journalists are more likely to tolerate deception than other journalists; and that women are less likely to tolerate deception than men, possibly because women place higher value preserving relationships. He concluded that journalists' perception of ethics depends largely on their workplace, where their understanding of the way things are done and what is tolerable is formed. These findings suggest that newsroom management is exceptionally important in keeping reporters ethical and thus preserving the trust of the public. These findings have been backed up by other studies. One such study observed the ethical decision-making at one newspaper and concluded that ethics need to be highly visible in order to be effectively applied, and that the commitment of the newspaper's leaders to ethics was

essential to running an ethical newspaper (Boeyink). However, the study also concluded that the ability of reporters to give feedback to their editors was also important in establishing a working ethical framework in the newspaper (Boeyink). Furthermore, even a newspaper known for high ethical standards will drop them over time, have people that will break those standards, and sometimes be swayed by the bottom line (Boeyink).

Not all agree that journalists' ethics are completely defined by their environments. Voakes found contradictory research: While broader ethical studies found that an individual's ethics was largely influenced by their environment, studies that focused specifically on journalism found that their ethics were more defined by intrinsic motivations. Voakes' own study divided possible influences into seven categories: Individual, competition, organization, occupation, law, small group and extramedia. Voakes hoped to evaluate the influences and rank them in order of importance; however, he was unable to find evidence of any hierarchy of influences and concluded that none took any precedence over any other.

Other studies have supported the assertion that lawyers and lawsuits are now a driving force in making ethical decisions in media (Splichal). In fact, lawyers are now being used by many institutions as ethical advisors (Splichal). Some argue that ethical and legal advice are separate and should not be handled by lawyers; others feel that because the law is often defined by ethical standards, the two are inextricably linked (Splichal). Many newspapers' and organizations' ethical codes and policies are now being shaped by lawyers (Splichal). Other critics, such as Kaplar, have suggested that the intrusion of law into journalism means that newspapers are now driven by fear of being prosecuted or sued, rather than striving to reach a personal standard of ethics, thus

conditioning them to think in terms of what is legal rather than ethical. Kaplar also argues that the government has eroded ethics in journalism by stifling the development and overregulating cable television, a medium with a lot of potential to hold itself to high journalistic standards beyond the realm of the law. Kaplar, writing in 1995, correctly predicted that the Internet would have considerable effect on journalism; however, he seemed to predict that the information superhighway would foster a higher level of journalistic ethics. This prediction has not been borne out by history and recent media coverage, which has judged Internet journalism to be highly suspect and frequently run by heavily biased sources.

There is also the suggestion that the ethics of journalists may be eroded by the culture of objectivity itself. Stoker says that the reigning paradigm of objectivity forces journalists to remove their own opinion and thus their humanity, forcing them to act entirely amorally by not allowing them to reach their own ethical conclusions. Further, he argues that such a system is not an accurate reflection of the reporter's views, thus breaking journalism's cardinal virtue of truth. Stoker offers a separate system, "existential journalism," that allows journalists to act as ethical agents who can choose to help members of the public. This system also enables journalists to take deeper looks into a story, rather than simply reporting both sides of the story and letting the reader decide who is right.

MacManus puts out the view that journalists have very few moral choices to make anymore, in that editors and owners dictate all the actions for their staff. Thus, current codes of ethics for journalists, which are written for individual reporters, don't adequately

reflect the reality of reporting, and instead should be directed towards the owners of newspapers rather than the reporters.

Methodology

This paper will take the form of an instrumental case study: it will examine the three separate cases of Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair to "provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization" (Denzin).

The method used for analyzing the three cases will be the Potter Box, developed by Dr. Ralph Potter (Backus). The Potter Box is a process which splits an ethical dilemma into four separate elements: empirical definition, values, principles and loyalties (Backus). The first element, the empirical definition, says to state objectively the facts of the case (Backus). The second element calls for identifying the values and comparing the merits of each value (Backus). The third step concerns principles: It says to state a principle honored by each value, and then to evaluate the relative merits of each value. The final steps concern the last element, loyalties. One must examine to whom loyalty is being given, determine if anyone else deserves loyalty, select a course of action that satisfies loyalties, principles and values, and evaluate the results of this course of action (Backus).

This method is often used to analyze ethical decisions in communication, both as a learning opportunity in fictional case studies, and as an analysis of the thought processes behind actual decisions (Backus). The Potter Box model is designed to make sure that all the important points (loyalties, principles and values) are brought to

attention; however, the model does not guarantee that it will provide the right ethical decision (Backus). Different people can apply the Potter Box to the same situation and come up with different conclusions as to the correct ethical decision (Backus).

This method will not be applied to the fraudulent reporters themselves, as their actions are a clear-cut failure of ethics; rather, the actions of their supervisors and editors will be the ones analyzed to see what, if anything, they did wrong and how they could have prevented the scandal in question. The principle used in all cases will be The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (see Appendix I).

Janet Cooke

In 1981, Janet Cooke disgraced the *Washington Post* when her Pulitzer Prize-winning story about an eight-year-old heroin addict named Jimmy was discovered to be patently false (Maraniss). In the aftermath, it was discovered that she had lied on her resume, falsely claiming that she had graduated from Vassar and spoke several languages fluently (Nance).

Cooke was so impressive in her interview that her resume was only given a cursory glance (Green, "The Reporter"). She was well-dressed and articulate; she had a strong portfolio and an excellent (falsified, unknown to the *Post*) background (Green, "The Reporter"). It also did not hurt that she was both a woman and a racial minority at a time when there was pressure to hire more of both (Green, "The Reporter"). In the time before "Jimmy's World" was published, she made a name for herself as a very smart reporter who wrote solid, well-written stories and quickly became a star among the staff

(Green, "The Reporter"). She was also described as a solidly middle-class woman who wore fashionable clothes but had problems with money (Green, "The Doubts").

At the time of Cooke's hiring, the D.C. area was overrun with heroin, and the *Post* was running stories about the drug and its effect on the area all the time (Green, "The Story"). Cooke had been sent to cover a rumor about a new form of heroin that had the effect of ulcerating those who used it (Green, "The Reporter"). Cooke was unable to substantiate this rumor, but in searching, compiled a hefty amount of research that editors felt could be turned into a front-page article (Green, "The Reporter"). Cooke did more research turned in her notes to her editor Milton Coleman. Coleman seized on a brief mention of a child addict, telling her to use that child as the main hook for her story (Green, "The Story").

Cooke had not met such a child but had gotten hints of the presence of child addicts from several heroin dealers ("Janet Cooke and Jimmy's World"). Her attempts to track down such a child failed; she came back to her editor saying that she was unable to find the child she mentioned in her notes but had found another, Jimmy (Green, "The Story"). The name "Jimmy" was understood to not be the child's real name; the general staff assumed that Milton Coleman knew Jimmy's actual name. He did not; however, he saw the name "Tyrone" in Cooke's notes and believed that that was the child's real name (Green, "The Story"). "Jimmy's World" was printed on September 28, 1980 (Cooke).

"Jimmy's World" naturally caused an uproar, with its vivid descriptions of little Jimmy being injected with heroin by his mother's boyfriend as, "The needle slides into the boy's soft skin like a straw pushed into the center of a freshly baked cake" (Cooke). Washington D.C. mayor Marion Barry began a search for "Jimmy" to get him treatment

(Maraniss). So big was the story that even first lady Nancy Reagan, then promoting her anti-drug "Just Say No" campaign, expressed concerns for Jimmy's well-being (Green, "The Publication"). Naturally, Jimmy was never found (Maraniss). "Jimmy" was understood to be a fake name to protect the child among the *Post* higher-ups, and the *Post* refused to give up the child's real name (Green, "The Publication"). Even as the mayor and his staff began to doubt that Jimmy existed, the *Post* gave Cooke a promotion and nominated her for a Pulitzer, which she won (Green, "The Publication"). Other reporters were told to find other child heroin addicts but none was ever found (Green, "The Publication").

It was the Pulitzer that would bring down Cooke's story. After the Pulitzer winners were announced, the Associated Press printed an article on them, including a biographical sketch of each winner. The *Toledo Blade*, where Cooke once worked, also ran a biography of their now-famous former employee. Comparing the two stories, *Blade* employees noticed discrepancies and sent corrections to the AP (Green, "The Prize"). The AP had gotten their information from the *Post*, which had let Cooke send in the biographical information herself; the *Post* was informed of the discrepancies by the AP (Green, "The Prize"). This prompted the editors of the *Post* to take a closer look at Cooke's resume, which they found to have several falsifications (Green, "The Prize"). When pressed on the issue, Cooke admitted lying on the resume about graduating from Vassar (Green, "The Prize"). This prompted much deeper investigation into the article, upon which Cooke also confessed making up the "Jimmy's World" article (Green, "The Prize").

There had been warning signs long before Cooke won the Pulitzer; some had doubted the veracity of "Jimmy's World" from the beginning (Green, "The Doubts"). Cooke was a cosmopolitan woman who was born middle-class, and her roommate found it hard to believe that a woman such as Cooke would have been comfortable enough to walk into the ghetto alone and interview people (Green, "The Doubts"). However, the editors at the *Post* used the same information to come up with the opposite conclusion: Cooke was so removed from the inner city that it was assumed that she wouldn't have the familiarity to invent the story plausibly (Green, "The Story"). Others were uncertain of Jimmy's existence. After their search for Jimmy found nothing, Mayor Barry and his staff were skeptical about the truth of the story (Green, "The Story").

A fellow reporter, Courtland Milloy, had noticed that Cooke seemed completely unfamiliar with the ghetto where Jimmy allegedly lived, but when he brought this to Milton Coleman's attention, Coleman privately dismissed it as professional jealousy (Green, "The Publication"). Other reporters, and even one editor whom Cooke had previously worked under, also brought their doubts to Milton Coleman and assistant managing editor Bob Woodward immediately before the decision was made to nominate the story for a Pulitzer, all of which were dismissed (Green, "The Doubts"). Woodward said that investigating the story would have given off the impression that the *Post* only thoroughly fact-checked its stories after nominating them for serious prizes, as opposed to when they were originally published (Green, "The Pressures"). Such logic is self-serving and lazy; there were concrete reasons for these doubts which Woodward had not heard at the time of publication, and furthermore it assumes that the fact-checking process is infallible and will find the same result every time. A judge might use the same

logic to dismiss an appeal to a guilty verdict despite the introduction of new evidence. Nevertheless, Woodward and Coleman were mindful enough about the doubts surrounding the story that, when Cooke proposed a story about a 14-year-old prostitute, they took the precaution of asking for a face-to-face meeting with the subject (Green, "The Doubts"). That meeting was scheduled but kept getting postponed by Cooke, who said her subject was being uncooperative (Green, "The Doubts").

Cooke herself has said that she attributes part of her motivation to lie to the "hothouse" pressures of the *Post*, as well as her unrealistic goals as a young reporter ("Nightline"). Bill Green noted that the pressures of the *Post* can be especially hard for new writers, many of whom come from being star reporters in smaller papers to suddenly being small fish in a bigger pond ("The Pressures"). On the other hand, editor-in-chief Ben Bradlee felt that the *Post* offices were an encouraging atmosphere (Green, "The Pressures"). Several of Cooke's coworkers believe that the problem was less the pressures of the job than Cooke's own personal ambition to reach the front page (Green, "The Pressures").

Cooke's editor-in-chief, Ben Bradlee, was an ostentatious and autocratic man best known for being the editor above Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein during its coverage of the Watergate scandal ("Janet Cooke's Legacy"). The newspaper's owner, Al Newhart, has described Bradlee's style as emphasizing what Newhart described as "holy s--- journalism" ("Nightline"). This borderline-sensationalistic coverage may have added to the pressure to create Jimmy. The *Post*'s and Woodward's connection to the Watergate scandal may have done its part in helping the scandal along: Woodward has stated that, when faced with doubts about Cooke's story, it chose to react in the same manner as it did

while investigating the Nixon White House: backing up its reporter 100 percent and protecting its sources (Griffith).

Following Cooke's firing, the *Post's* ombudsman Bill Green was given full access to the *Post's* resources and full disclosure from its employees, and his analysis of the circumstances that led to "Jimmy's World" being published is held up as the textbook example of how to respond to a serious scandal in the newsroom (Dorroh). Green's article, which largely defused a lot of the controversy, concluded that while a lot of important failings came together to allow the Cooke scandal to happen, including too much trust in reporters and anonymous sources and not enough trust in the doubts of other reporters, the system on the whole was a worthy and respectable one (Green, "The Conclusions").

The only person who would not talk to Green about the scandal was Cooke herself. Since the scandal, she has disappeared from journalism, and has rarely been seen (Nance). Immediately afterward, *Post* owner Al Newhart sympathetically attempted to get Cooke another job at one of his smaller papers, but could not because that paper's staff revolted when they heard the news ("Dateline"). She then disappeared from the field of journalism and has not been in the public eye since (Nance). She resurfaced for a short period in 1996, giving several interviews including one that resulted in a major story for *GQ*, written by Mike Sager, Cooke's former *Post* colleague and ex-boyfriend (Nance). It was revealed in those stories that she lived in France for a few years, and in 1996 was making a meager living as a department store clerk (Nance). She also expressed a desire to return to journalism ("Dateline"). Naturally, that never happened, and she soon disappeared again (Nance). She and Sager sold the rights to the *GQ* story to

Hollywood for \$1.5 million, but as of 2006 that movie is not in production (Elvin). Sometime around 1999, Cooke was attending the University of Michigan and working on a fine arts degree (Elvin). Sager said in 2003 that the two of them hadn't spoken in six years (Nance).

Ethical Analysis

As with many of the decisions to be analyzed, the question of whether Cooke's resume should have been checked is one made much easier with the benefit of hindsight. However, it will still be analyzed through the Potter Box. The situation has already been defined above: A new potential hire has an impressive resume and gives an impressive interview. Should her resume be checked? In hoping to choose the best candidate for the job, the main value is that of producing quality journalism, although side values may include expediency and not wasting the company's resources. The principle in this case is the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics. In examining these values, quality journalism must naturally take precedent over the others; it is the very goal any journalist is pursuing. Next, the loyalties: while there may be some slight loyalty to the new hire, there hasn't been much time to bond, so the loyalty belongs to the public whom the journalists serve and the company that employs them. In this case, the best way to satisfy all values, principles, and loyalties is to check the resumes of potential hires; doing so will screen out any applicant dishonest enough to lie on his or her resume, thus leading to better journalism, providing better service to the public, and protecting the company from poor quality product. This situation is more a question of good business practices than it is a question of ethics on the part of the *Washington Post*; however, it is certainly ethical to run a business to the best of one's abilities, rather than doing a

slipshod job and hurting one's employers and co-workers. In this way, effective business practice and business ethics overlap, making the Potter Box useful in analyzing business decisions as well as ethical ones.

A more important ethical issue is Milton Coleman and Bob Woodward's decision to ignore the misgivings of several reporters and at least one editor, dismissing their concerns as either unwarranted or caused by professional jealousy. This is more clearly a dilemma of ethics than the previous question and requires deeper discussion. The facts of the case are this: An editor is given a well-written feature story of great social import that makes the front page. Later, many doubts swirl around the newsroom about the article being a hoax, and city officials are denying the story; however, no one has provided evidence that the story is untrue. Should the reporter's story be investigated? The values in question are truth (providing accurate journalism) and trust (in one's reporters). Of these values, the commitment to truth has to take precedence over trust in reporters. Journalism is the pursuit and reporting of truth; truth is the end goal. However, trust is not something to be discounted, either; without some trust in reporters, no story can be published because every word is suspect. Next, the principles, as stated in the Code of Ethics: "Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible." Finally, the loyalties: by choosing to ignore the misgivings of other reporters, Coleman and Woodward displayed loyalty towards Cooke by supporting her story unquestioned, but to a greater extent the newspaper, which would be embarrassed to investigate the truth of one of its own stories after publication. However, several other parties deserved loyalty as well: The other reporters, who are also valued members of the staff and have a stake

in the reputation of the company; the city officials, who are potentially being defamed by the story; and the general public, which deserves to know the truth. Further, the newspaper deserves to have its integrity upheld; in a way, Woodward and Coleman were being disloyal to the newspaper as well. The loyalty to these doubtful sources should have been enough to prompt a further investigation, especially considering the sheer number of them.

In this specific case, investigating the story's accuracy would have solved a lot of problems; while Cooke explained away Jimmy's apparent disappearance by claiming that the family had moved away, an investigation of her notes and tapes revealed that she had very little information on the alleged Jimmy, a fact suspicious enough to make the entire story untrustworthy (Green, "The Confession"). While the downside of such an action is that it could make a possibly honest reporter feel untrusted, this is a situation that can be handled delicately, whereas handling an untrue story delicately becomes increasingly difficult the longer it has gone uncorrected. Prolonging the situation only does more and more damage to the newspaper's reputation.

Woodward's decision to nominate the story for a Pulitzer despite several pressing doubts from significant sources falls into a similar pattern. The major loyalties being displayed were towards Cooke, whom Woodward trusted, and towards the newspaper, which would be denied the potential prestige and fame of a Pulitzer Prize should Woodward instead listen to the doubters. Again, the major loyalty should have been with the public, who needed the truth more than the newspaper needed a Pulitzer Prize. Also, Woodward's loyalty to the newspaper would have been better demonstrated by avoiding the scandal rather than shooting for a Pulitzer.

One aspect of criticism in the Cooke scandal was Milton Coleman's decision to push Janet Cooke to write a story about a child heroin addict, a story which perhaps should not have been trusted to a young reporter. Coleman's decision may not have seemed like an ethical decision as much as a simple order of business; however, considering the importance of this particular decision in hindsight, it deserves analysis. The facts of the case are an ambitious young reporter has turned an extensive series of notes about heroin which involves a brief mention of a child addict. Does he tell this young reporter to jump on this child as a hook for the story? The value here, for once, is not truth or accuracy, as the editor in question does not have any reason to believe the story is untrue and is certainly not encouraging the reporter to lie. Instead, the values are strong, entertaining writing: the use of the child as a hook will make for a catchier story and successfully illustrate the problem of heroin abuse in the area. Further, it fulfills the principle, included in the SPJ Code of Ethics, of informing the world about the public's affairs, which certainly includes a heroin epidemic so bad that it affects elementary school children. However, the loyalty here is divided between public and reporter; will the public and be better served by assigning this story to the young reporter, who may be not ready for such a responsibility? Is this fair to the reporter? Is it a better idea to give it to an older reporter, who may be more jaded and not as hungry for an amazing story as a younger reporter? This is a difficult decision, knowing in hindsight that Janet Cooke would not be up to the challenge; however, all Milton Coleman had to suggest that Cooke would fail ethically was her youth and ambition, which are not necessarily negative qualities. Coleman's decision to tell Cooke to focus on the child is ethically in the clear. If anything, the only problem here is in Cooke's not recognizing the dangers and ethical

significance of making up a Jimmy; however, the significance should be so obvious that the *Post* can reasonably assume that its new reporters already know this.

The main flaw in this case was too much trust in the story and not enough trust given to doubts about it. This also was a major theme in the next case, Stephen Glass and *The New Republic*.

Stephen Glass

In May of 1998, Stephen Glass's promising career, as a writer and associate editor for prominent newsmagazine *The New Republic*, was brought to a sudden end when Adam Penenberg, a reporter at *Forbes Digital Tool*, began to make inquiries about one of Glass's stories, a piece about a teenage hacker entitled "Hack Heaven" (Penenberg). Penenberg's inquiries would eventually reveal that Glass had invented the entire piece out of whole cloth, and a subsequent investigation by *The New Republic* revealed that he had fabricated, in part or in whole, 27 of the 41 stories that he wrote for the magazine during his time as a writer.

What made the Glass scandal so interesting to outsiders, interesting enough to warrant a feature film made about the scandal, was the sheer scope of Glass's fabrications. His stories were not simply untrue, but fantastically untrue. One of the subjects of his articles was a church that worshipped George Herbert Walker Bush (Chait). Another described a conservative activist group that Glass described as a literal right-wing conspiracy, and whose members included a man who believed that then-President Clinton was a lesbian in disguise (Glass, Plotters). While some of the pieces were completely and extravagantly false, other fraudulent stories that he wrote were

partial frauds; in some of his articles, the basic facts of the story would be true but supported by fabricated sources and quotes ("To," June 29 1998). Not all of his stories were funny stories about offbeat subjects either; some were in fact very serious, such as one that accused former Clinton aide Vernon Jordan of sexual misconduct ("Stephen").

Glass was never described by his peers as a great writer. Glass's style of prose was apparently inelegant from the beginning, and his early work in college is described as "clunky and imprecise" ("Old"). This weakness in writing apparently had not improved substantially during his time at *The New Republic*. Jonathan Chait, a coworker at *The New Republic*, describes him as a writer who needed substantial editing to turn his work into readable articles (Chait). Chait also writes that Glass was an insightful reporter and a gifted interviewer, and as evidence he offers an anecdote of a profile on Alan Greenspan which they both worked on; it was Glass who noticed a young woman stealing Greenspan's name placard and subsequently got her to confess to being a "Greenspan junkie" (Chait). He was also described as a diligent fact-checker of other people's stories (Chait).

Glass's social skills aided him not only as an interviewer, but also in office politics (Chait). He used these social skills to become very popular among his colleagues; former coworkers attest that he was beloved at *The New Republic* (Shafer). One of his former editors stated that he was "always hovering affably around everyone" and was "eager to please," but was also insecure and constantly needed praise ("Stephen"). Chait described him as uncommonly friendly (Chait). One of his closest friends, Hanna Rosin, says that she reacted to Glass's more-than-reasonable firing by stomping into Lane's office and launching insults at him (Shafer). Despite the popularity,

which apparently predated his outlandishly untruthful stories, Glass has said that he mostly lied out of self-loathing and a need for esteem (Shafer).

Of particular interest about Stephen Glass's "Hack Heaven" piece is that absolutely none of it passes even a small bit of fact-checking. "Hack Heaven" is about the exploits of non-existent people, a non-existent corporation, fictional legislation, fictional government agencies, fictional lobbying groups, and a hacker convention that never happened (Penenberg). There are other, even more immediate inconsistencies with the story; Scott Rosenberg points out that Jukt Micronics, the fictional corporation in the article, is listed as a "big time software firm," despite the fact that "micronics" are hardware, not software. He also points out the suspiciousness of the opening anecdote, where 15-year-old hacker Ian Restil makes higher and higher demands of the Jukt executives in exchange for protecting their security systems from other hackers. The scene is too punchy and effective, and conforms too much to stereotypes, not to come across as suspicious, says Rosenberg, and moreover, it prompts the question of how a reporter like Glass was given access to what surely must have been a private corporate meeting. Glass wrote many such unbelievable stories, and not only was the lack of realism a missed warning sign, but the vast amount of copy that he turned out in a short amount of time (Dowd). Such a large amount of work, not only for *The New Republic* but for other magazines as well, should make one wonder about where Glass was finding the time to do the reporting for all these stories (Dowd).

Glass had two editors during his time at *The New Republic*, Michael Kelly and his replacement, Charles Lane, who took over after Kelly was fired for his alleged negativity towards then-President Clinton (Kennedy). There was very little direct criticism of either

Lane or Kelly after the story broke, although there was criticism directed toward the editorial staff in general. Lane was mostly met with admiration for decisively and quickly dealing with the situation; Kelly himself commended *The New Republic* for its handling of the situation and called himself a "goddamn idiot" for not catching any of Glass's lies (Kennedy).

Glass himself was, for a period, a fact-checker for the magazine, an experience which Lane believes familiarized Glass with the problems in the fact-checking system which he would later exploit (Neuwirth). The problem may have also been a lack of emphasis on fact-checking to begin with; when Lane began his tenure as editor, there were three editors, but following that there was a period during which there were no fact-checkers at all, and at the time the Glass scandal broke, there was only one fact-checker assisted by interns (Dowd). Glass is said to have inserted obvious, easily-correctible errors into his stories for the fact-checkers to find and correct, thus making them feel like they had done their job (Turner). *The New Republic* also insists that Glass was able to answer any questions they ever had about his articles (Neuwirth). An example of this successful evasion by Glass is an article which included a detail about miniature bottles of alcohol from the hotel minibar; the incident described in the article took place in a hotel room that did not, in fact, have minibars, but Glass was able to explain it away, saying that he saw miniature bottles and simply assumed that they came from a minibar ("Old").

However, there were many, many more complaints about Glass's reporting (Last). During a nineteen-month period, *The New Republic* printed four letters in which Glass was accused of seriously shoddy journalism, and seven more that accused him of outright

lying (Last). On occasion, such letters included concrete, verifiable accusations of untruthfulness; one interviewee complained that a Glass article said he dismissed a question which the official tape of the interview showed had never even been asked in the first place (Last). On six separate occasions, the accusations were serious enough to warrant a written response from Glass himself (Last).

It would seem that the editors at *The New Republic* had more than enough warning signs about Glass's integrity to warrant an investigation, or at the very least prompt enough suspicions that the magazine would not be taken completely off-guard by Glass's fraudulent practices, as they claim they were (Last). The fact that they did no such thing suggests that they didn't take these claims seriously, as does the fact that in his written responses to critics, Glass was allowed to write mean-spirited counterattacks (Last). Glass received no reprimand for his lies, and no investigations were launched to check the veracity of his reporting. There is no evidence that anyone was suspicious at all before "Hack Heaven." All this speaks to *The New Republic* having a very high level of disregard for the possibility of making errors, dismissing any objection on the part of the outside world and having absolute faith in their reporters and institution.

The aftermath was swift: Glass was quickly fired from the magazine after the "Hack Heaven" piece was revealed to be false ("To," June 1 1998). *The New Republic* wrote a retraction of "Hack Heaven" as well as several other of Glass's stories in its next issue, and announced that they were investigating all of Glass's work ("To," June 1 1998). Two weeks later, they announced that 27 of his 41 stories were partially or wholly suspect ("To," June 29 1998). After his firing, Glass completed his law degree at Georgetown (Shafer). He also wrote a novel largely based around his experiences, *The*

Fabulist, which was derided by critics as an immoral, self-serving and uninteresting fictionalization of his ethical transgressions (Chait). A feature film about the scandal, *Shattered Glass*, was released in 2003. Close friend Hanna Rosin says that after the scandal, Glass would not respond to calls or letters from her (Rosin). Neither she nor close friend Jonathan Chait have spoken to him since the scandal, and both resent the way they are characterized in Glass's fictional novel, which contains characters that both feel represent themselves (Chait). Chait writes that Glass is unable to deal with questions of morality (Chait). Rosin, after reading his book, concludes that Glass must have felt that journalism was a corrupt practice to begin with, as the journalist characters in his novel are all "dullards or jerks" who will do anything for a story (Rosin). In an interview with Salon.com, Glass refused to respond to any of the criticisms brought up by Chait or Rosin (Lauerman).

Ethical Analysis

Again, the major ethical decision involved is whether Glass's articles should have been further investigated after complaints from their subjects. However, the case here is a bit stickier than in the Cooke case, where the skeptical parties were concerned, trusted co-workers. With Glass, however, the doubts came from aggrieved subjects of his articles, who were attacked in *The New Republic* and certainly could have been lying in order to preserve their own reputations. However, the sheer number of complaints, as well as the easily verifiable nature of some of those criticisms, should have set off alarms. The objective definition of the case is that a star reporter is receiving frequent criticisms for the accuracy of his reporting. Should his work be verified? The value of truth says that it should, but the value of trust in the reporter says that it is unnecessary. However,

truth and accuracy are supposed to come first. The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics has a very specific rule regarding this question, one that applies to both reporters and editors: "Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing." While these subjects sent in letters that were published by *The New Republic*, they were not given much weight, even when they included verifiably true accusations of bad reporting on Glass's part. The loyalties being displayed are to the writer of the piece; none at all is being given to the subjects of the articles, and very little is given to the public, which certainly has a vested interest in finding out whether those criticisms are true. The best course of action here is to give the complaints consideration, use them to evaluate the stories in question better, and if possible, do fact-checking beyond the reporter's own assertions.

Despite Lane's contention that Glass's time as a fact-checker gave him the knowledge to beat the system, it is difficult to imagine any kind of working fact-checking system in which a piece like "Hack Heaven," which could not be supported by any source at all except Glass's own notes, can get through to publication. This brings up an additional ethical question: Did more emphasis need to be placed on fact-checking and accuracy? In this case, the only details that need to be examined are that an editor in charge of a respected insider news magazine is faced with establishing the structure of the fact-checking process. The values are truth, but also trust in writers. Loyalty goes to the public and to the writers; however, the reporters would certainly want a solid fact-checking system to catch their mistakes before they go to publication. This is an easy question to answer, but again, in hindsight.

The Glass scandal, like the Cooke, again comes down to supervisors' willful denial of uncomfortable truth. On one hand, the fact that *New Republic* editors ignored angered outside sources rather than their own trusted reporters makes them less culpable than their *Post* counterparts; on the other, the sheer amount of false information they let through makes them much more at fault. While not forgivable, it is understandable how these scandals came to pass. However, in the case of Jayson Blair, more serious and more numerous problems came into play.

Jayson Blair

Scandal rocked the *New York Times* in 2003 when *Times* reporter Jayson Blair was discovered to have plagiarized a number of his stories from other sources. He was quickly released from his job at the *Times*, and in the weeks to follow, *Times* Editor-in-chief Howell Raines and managing editor Gerald Boyd turned in their resignations as well (Mnookin, "Read All About It").

In contrast with Cooke and Glass, whose records were clean before the incidents that cost them their jobs, there were several warning signs that Blair was an untrustworthy reporter before he was hired by the *Times*. While a student at the University of Maryland, College Park, he had been a reporter for a student-run newspaper, the *Diamondback* (Folkenflik). He had failed to turn in an important story on one occasion, and offered the excuse that he had been knocked out by a gas leak in his dorm room that nearly killed him (Rosen, "All about the retrospect"). This was a lie, and in fact, his room did not even have gas going to it (Rosen, "All about the retrospect"). After being a reporter, he was to become a copy editor but abruptly quit before starting

work to join the college's other student newspaper, *CNS*, angering his colleagues at the *Diamondback* (Folkenflik). He interned one summer at the *Boston Globe*, where his tenacity and ambition were admired but his problems with accuracy were duly noted (Folkenflik). His ambition also manifested itself in ugly ways, such as attempting to get a fellow intern's story removed from the front page even though he had no authority to advise on such a matter and worked in a completely separate section of the newspaper from the other intern (Folkenflik).

After his internship, he became editor-in-chief for the *Diamondback* through a professor's recommendation, and his tenure there was characterized by accuracy problems, missed production deadlines, mismanagement of payroll, and high turnover (Folkenflik). The summer after his junior year, he became an intern for the *Times* and was hired shortly thereafter (Folkenflik). The University of Maryland apparently mentioned nothing of his uneven record as editor of the *Diamondback* to the *Times*, nor did the *Times* ask the University about the advisability of hiring a junior who had not yet graduated from college (Folkenflik). Blair, however, was upfront about the fact that he was disliked on a personal level by his peers at the *Globe* during his internship, and seemed to be trying to improve his social skills (Rosen, "All about the retrospect"). Despite Blair's claims that his problems with plagiarism came only during the time directly preceding his firing, there is evidence that he was plagiarizing from other sources as far back as his days with the *Boston Globe* (Leo).

Blair had always had a problem with accuracy, but Blair himself has dismissed his questionable accuracy rate as an acceptable number and unavoidable consequence of the amount of copy he was producing; he considers his ability to pump out so much work one

of his greatest strengths as a reporter. Blair's prose was described as excellent, both by himself and by others (Gardner). He also was noted for having good social skills and a good nose for stories (Gardner).

At the *Times*, a reporter gets reprimanded if his or her inaccuracy rate (the percentage of their articles which need corrections) rises over 5 percent (Gibbs). Blair began to have serious problems with accuracy between September 2001 and June 2002, mostly caused by cocaine and alcohol (Gibbs). He was privately reprimanded and voluntarily took a leave of absence to get himself together (Gibbs). In the months after his return, he was assigned an easier job in the sports section, and his accuracy rate was no longer a problem.

Problems again arose when he became one of many reporters assigned to the D.C. sniper case (Gibbs). Once there, he began to break several scoops, such as DNA recovered from saliva left on a grape stem, and he was vaulted to the lead reporter position on the story (Gibbs). However, a number of those scoops were angrily denied by prosecutors (Wemple). Other *Times* reporters on the story expressed doubts about his finds and were told that changes would be made to Blair's story, but that never happened (Mnookin, "Times Bomb"). Blair himself claims to have been working off a bad internal source, and that the main gist and majority of the details of his stories were correct (Blair 259). Importantly, the editor overseeing the sniper coverage did not know about Blair's previous problems with accuracy ("Dateline").

After again switching beats, Blair began the series of plagiarized articles that would begin the nationwide scandal in earnest. Rather than showing up at sites to report on articles, he would instead write entirely from his New York apartment and do no

reporting at all. The story that got Blair's plagiarism discovered was about the mother of the last American soldier missing in action after the fall of Iraq ("Dateline"). Blair's story was plagiarized from a story that had previously run in the *San Antonio Express-News*, written by Macarena Hernandez, a reporter who had been in the same internship program with Blair at the *Times* ("Dateline"). The detail that gave it away was a reference in Blair's story to Martha Stewart furniture on the mother's patio, which was also mentioned in Hernandez's story and hadn't been unpacked or assembled when Hernandez interviewed the woman ("Dateline"). Hernandez found it unlikely that the fretful woman would have had the time or energy to assemble the furniture herself, and furthermore, several lines and phrases were taken from her story verbatim (Anders).

Blair, in interviews and in his published memoirs, explains his behavior as the result of a bipolar episode, and that during the period where he most significantly plagiarized, he says that he was blacked out and can only vaguely put it together in his memory; after the scandal broke, Blair felt that he needed to withdraw from the world and committed himself to a mental asylum for six days (Blair 46). Blair's explanation matches with reports from his friends, who say that during that period he was constantly distracted and uninterested, which very well could have been symptoms of bipolar disorder (Mnookin, "Times Bomb"). He also admits his problems with drugs but claims to have been clean and sober for more than a year before the period in question (Blair 63). He states that at the time, he felt that he was simply going through a bad patch, and that once he overcame it, he could go back to doing good work (Hirschman). It is difficult to say for sure whether or not Blair's claims of manic depression are a legitimate

excuse or another lie, but it is certainly discomfiting if true, because it concerns a problem that could affect honest and dishonest reporters alike.

The *Times* may have been able to escape embarrassment had they had a better method of responding to readers' complaints. At the time, readers who called the *Times* with complaints were redirected to an automated answering machine rather than an actual human being, a system that made readers feel as though they had no voice with the *Times* ("Janet Cooke's Legacy"). In addition, those calls were never returned (Thomas). A lawyer whom Blair misrepresented in a story says that he wouldn't have bothered to fix a misquote because he feels that such a thing "happens all the time," while other victims of Blair's lies state they stopped trusting the newspaper when the lies were printed and felt that contacting the newspaper would come to no good (Hassan). Some tried to contact Blair himself and got no response (Hassan). The *Times's* method of responding to readers was clearly inadequate and gives credence to Blair's contention that the *Times* was a mammoth, impersonal bureaucracy which fueled and accelerated the mental breakdown which led to his plagiarism.

Blair described the *Times* as having become this uncaring bureaucracy under Raines and Boyd, who only cared that the number of his stories that needed corrections had decreased, and not about the quality of his writing at all (Blair 211). One of the reasons that Blair used to excuse his behavior partially is that the *Times*, as he described it, was also a culture of lies where deception was pervasive. One such deception is the practice of putting one reporter's byline on an article that was actually compiled through the research and reporting of several reporters – sometimes other staff reporters, but also usually uncredited freelancers that make up what Blair calls the *Times's* "hidden army"

(Blair 71). Shortly after the Blair scandal broke, *Times* reporter Rick Bragg resigned after it was found he had depended on a freelancer to do his reporting when he could have done it himself; the resignation led to this hidden army being revealed to the general public, when the editors wanted to keep their existence unknown outside the newspaper (Blair 71). While many reporters in the *Times* denied relying heavily on stringers for their reporting, several interns and freelancers came out to testify that they had in fact done major reporting on high-profile stories without hope of getting a byline (Kurtz).

The key technique in his description was "toe-touching," a process wherein a reporter does his reporting or conducts an interview over a long distance via phone or Internet, or through other reporters' notes. The reporter then makes a brief, often momentary visit to the city where the event happened or the interviewed person resides. This allows the newspaper to put the dateline of that city at the beginning of the article, implying that the reporter was there personally to do the reporting, rather than only making a short token appearance (Blair 254). According to Blair, this practice was technically against the rules; however, it was condoned and often required at the *Times*, because Raines wanted to give the *Times* an aura of worldwide, omnipresent coverage (254). Getting a dateline and using one byline for stories were integral parts of maintaining that aura (Blair 254). A former *Times* staffer described the *Times's* system as one where "speaking truth to power" was not encouraged or rewarded, and that editors, especially copy editors, didn't have much contact with the writers ("*Times*").

During the period of deception that ultimately cost Blair his job, Blair did not leave New York to do the reporting on his articles, claiming that his mental state made him not want to leave his apartment, and instead restricted his reporting to phone

interviews and Internet research. This meant that the datelines on his stories, rather than being the partial fudge of toe-touching, were now in fact completely false, a fact that the *Times* staff did not know because Blair was lying to them about his reporting (Blair). Many analysts covering the story remarked that suspicions should have been aroused by the fact that Blair did not list any airplane tickets in his expense account; Blair knew people were too busy with other financial expenses to worry about one reporter's expense account (Thomas). Blair also filled in details for his stories by hacking into the photo editors' files, using a password he had gotten from an editor years earlier, and examining photos to pick up details that he himself had not witnessed (a tactic which can be used legitimately, though not in the manner that Blair had used it) (Blair 10).

Following the revelation that Blair was plagiarizing other sources, The *New York Times* ran a four-page article listing, in minute detail, all of Blair's mistakes, falsehoods and plagiarisms (Mnookin, "Times Bomb"). The *Times* was at a disadvantage, compared to the *Post*'s coverage of the Cooke scandal, because it had no ombudsman at the time (Getlin). Unlike Bill Green's lengthy, multi-part article at the *Post*, which effectively defused the controversy caused by Janet Cooke, this article only made things worse for the *Times* (Mnookin, "Times Bomb"). The major problem with it was that the lengthy list of minor details did nothing to answer the bigger questions brought up by the scandal, namely, what went wrong at the *New York Times* that allowed such a thing to happen (Mnookin, "Times Bomb").

Many place a lot of the blame for the Blair scandal on the *Times*'s editor-in-chief at the time, Howell Raines. Blair himself did not, saying that Raines and managing editor Gerald Boyd were among the people least responsible for the problems that he caused

(Blair 72). However, Raines had inadvertently built up a lot of resentment among the *Times* reporters during his time as editor. Raines, a forceful personality who modeled his management style on Bear Bryant, consolidated and enhanced his authority, gaining a reputation as an autocrat; editors moving up in the company found their careers stalled, and reporters found that they had less influence on what stories they covered (Kolbert). He also caused resentment with his efforts to raise the writers' "competitive metabolism" and make them more eager to find new scoops, and subsequently more attention and praise was given to writers with more attractive stories and style (Kolbert). Raines was apparently unaware of all the tension that his management style caused (Kolbert).

Raines was well-known for his practice of "flooding the zone," which entailed devoting all of the paper's resources to whatever story was big at the moment (Mnookin, "Times Bomb"). The practice sometimes led to magnificent coverage of stories, including the September 11th attacks, but it also led to reporters feeling like they were being sent on crusades (Mnookin, "Times Bomb"). A prime example is the Augusta Golf Club controversy, which Raines had reporters covering much more heavily than other papers, and even going to the point of removing editorials that downplayed the importance of the controversy (Mnookin, "Times Bomb"). Raines was also accused of playing favorites with his writers, and generally not taking in the input of others when making decisions (Poniewozik). He had what was described as a star system, wherein reporters were anointed as the next big thing and given the most desirable assignments (Mnookin, "Times Bomb"). Raines has defended himself by saying that he was simply carrying out the mandates of his superiors (Rieder).

One of the biggest and most frequent questions asked by commentators about the scandal is what role race had in Blair's hiring and career at the *Times*. Blair himself has said that he believes he was hired on his own merits, and that the fact of his race was just "icing on the cake" ("Fox" 2004a). He has also stated that he believes that if he was given undue support, it was for reasons other than his race ("Fox" 2004a). However, he also stated that affirmative action may have given him a leg up before he was ready for it, and that the anti-affirmative action backlash made it difficult to work ("Fox" 2004b). The *Times* hired Blair through an internship program designed to attract more minority reporters, a fact that in and of itself was criticized for putting too much attention on race rather than actual merit (Perkins). Raines himself has stated that he believes white liberal guilt was what motivated him to keep Blair on as a reporter after doubts were raised about his reporting (Mnookin, "Times Bomb").

The presence of race-based hiring makes the Blair case thornier than the other two cases (unlike Cooke, whose race may or may not have been a factor in her hiring, there is verifiable evidence of race-based hiring for Blair). Newspapers have very solid reasons for wanting a diverse reporting staff, especially in a heavily multi-racial area like New York. Having reporters of all backgrounds should certainly lead to better coverage, broaden the newspaper's perspective and facilitate easier interviews, thus making a potential hire's ethnicity a valid selling point. However, it is apparent that the *Times*, with or without racial motivations, overlooked some very important red flags in Blair's history.

The owners of the *Times* began an investigation into what had caused the scandal afterwards (Cannon). They had not originally planned to call for Raines' resignation

when the scandal first broke, but an investigation of the paper afterward revealed a strong vein of animosity that they had not expected to find, and it was this discovery that would eventually lead to the resignations of Raines and Boyd (Cannon).

The *New York Times*, since the scandal broke, has hired an ombudsman (Pollack). Arthur Sulzberger, owner of the *Times*, says that every newspaper has to assume that it has a lying reporter on staff (Rosen, "We mean business"). The *Times*, as well as several other papers, has reportedly decreased the use of anonymous sources in the wake of the Blair scandal (Strupp). In addition, it has ended the practice of toe-touching, instituted stricter guidelines for anonymous sources, and improved internal communication between editors ("Dateline").

After the scandal broke, Blair signed a six-figure book deal for his memoirs, *Burning Down My Masters' House*, which garnered mostly negative reviews (Waters). Blair insists that everything in the book is true and written by him ("Dateline"). However, one notable lie was uncovered; in talking about Gerald Boyd's response to Blair's drug problems, Blair mentions that Boyd's mother died of drug-related issues, when in actuality she died of sickle-cell anemia and never used drugs ("News"). Boyd called the mistake "hurtful" and "unconscionable" ("News"). Blair now mostly devotes his time to mental health advocacy.

Ethical Analysis

The case of Jayson Blair and the *New York Times* brings to light a number of questionable practices that go beyond Blair, the most questionable of which is toe-touching. In the Potter Box model, the essential details are this: There is a large

American newspaper which provides worldwide coverage and that wishes to maintain its reputation of near-omnipresent coverage. Should toe-touching be encouraged? As it was encouraged, the value of success was emphasized; however, truth should also have been emphasized. The SPJ Code of Ethics holds our key principle in this case, where it states "deliberate distortion is never permissible." Toe-touching is not a complete lie; however, it does deliberately mislead the reader into thinking something which isn't true. The loyalty here is divided between loyalty to the company, which is served by the strong reputation toe-touching helps provide, and to the public, which expect the complete and full truth from journalists. However, a newspaper's reputation is also severely damaged if any deliberate distortion of truth is uncovered; in this case, the integrity of the paper was called into question when many of Blair's interview subjects claimed that the dateline was incorrect in Blair's articles, not knowing that such a thing was sanctioned by the *Times*. Loyalty to the company would be best-served by not using toe-touching, and thus the safest and best course of action here is to avoid it.

The use of uncredited stringers provides a very similar case. While these stringers bulk up the coverage and make their writers look stronger, the public trust in the paper is damaged when interview subjects see bylines from reporters who never talked to them. Moreover, it shows a lack of loyalty to the freelancers themselves, who consequently feel unvalued by the newspaper.

Going back specifically to Jayson Blair, there is the question of whether or not he should have been hired at all. The previous two cases differ from Blair's in that there were no blaring warning signs of bad personal ethics, save Cooke's fraudulent resume, whereas there were many in retrospect about Blair. The *Times* was either misinformed or

negligent in checking Blair's background. The same ethics that applied to Cooke's resume also apply to Blair's; for the good of the public, the newspaper must hold itself to the highest possible standard when hiring reporters.

However, the *Times* did deal with Blair's problems as a reporter successfully, to a point: Editors were notified when Blair's accuracy rate became a problem, after which he was reprimanded, placed on probation and given a less demanding beat. Where things begin to go wrong again is his placement as a correspondent on the D.C. sniper case and, more importantly, that his direct supervising editor was not informed of his previous problems with accuracy. Blair himself doesn't seem to know why Raines and Boyd assigned him to the story (Blair 227). The reason appears to be simple favoritism; Raines has stated he liked Blair and wanted to see him do well (Mnookin, "Times Bomb").

Put through the Potter Box analysis, the question is, should a reporter with talent but job-threatening accuracy problems be given a second chance by being placed on a national story, and should the direct supervising editor be notified of these problems? The values involved are accuracy and career opportunity for the reporter. As in all previous cases, accuracy must reign over other choices, and again, the principle invoked must be, "Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error." Not only was national editor Jim Roberts not informed of the information which would have led to his being more skeptical of Blair's scoops, but Blair was not asked to identify the anonymous sources on which he based his reporting. The loyalty being displayed here was to Jayson Blair, who was afforded the benefit of avoiding the stigma of past mistakes; loyalties that should have been observed more closely were the ones to the public, and also to Jim Roberts and other reporters affected

by very possible shoddy journalism by Blair. Rather than assigning Blair to a story he didn't even seem to want, Raines should have been put Blair somewhere he could do less damage, and at the very least, Roberts should have been notified about his problems in the past, especially after questions began to arise about his reporting.

Finally, there is the method of dealing with reader complaints. Putting it through the Potter Box, we again see that part of the SPJ Code of Ethics says to "diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing." Again, not enough loyalty is given to the public and to subjects of new stories. A more responsive method of dealing with reader complaints would have been a better system, a lesson the *Times* seems to have learned with their hiring of an ombudsman.

Conclusions

While major details differentiate the three cases, several major threads connect them. Blair, Cooke and Glass were all treated with respect and admiration for their ability to write catchy, flashy stories; the stories which eventually undid Glass and Cooke were amazing, vivid stories and evidence suggests that Blair was fast-tracked for his ability to write the same. Furthermore, they were treated with an unwarranted level of trust, to the point where numerous warning signs about their integrity were easily brushed aside, even when in Cooke's case, such warnings were expressed by her own fellow staff reporters, or in Glass's and Blair's cases, where numerous readers attempted to correct their many inaccuracies and falsehoods. In all cases, the research indicates a certain

insularity which led the editors to believe their fraudulent reporters fully and dismiss any potential hits to their credibility, and in all cases, doing so did considerable damage to the reputations of their institutions.

What the Blair and Cooke cases tell us is that one thing that can be done to ensure that scandals like this don't happen is to make sure that young, untested reporters are not given more than they can handle, whether it be through the pressures of important assignments or through unearned promotions.

The three cases also lead to the conclusion that proper fact-checking is a vital and important part of any major journalism publication, and that stories with unverifiable facts (such as anonymous sources) should be shelved until doubts about them can be satisfied. The differing responses to the *Post's* and the *Times's* attempts to defuse the criticism also leads to the conclusion that major institutions need an ombudsman or some kind of independent source to assess problems adequately. An ombudsman could have helped the *Times* stave off the controversy of the Blair scandal and, even more importantly, fix the problems that caused the scandal before it even happened.

The Potter Box analysis method shows the biggest unifying thread in the three cases: People in charge forgot that the most important priority of journalists is to serve the public by reporting the truth, and not the reporters or the prestige of the newspaper. Editors and supervisors acted in favor of the writers, rather than towards the good of the public. Questions of accuracy and possible bad reporting were pushed aside in favor of trusting the reporter, even as numerous doubts accumulated. This disregard led to ignoring the doubts of several trusted staff members and city officials in the Janet Cooke case, the dismissal of numerous complaints of unfairness in the Stephen Glass case, and

in a great number of ethically questionable practices in the case of the *New York Times*. An ombudsman would certainly help to address such criticisms.

Equally important in establishing the readers' trust is a practical system of responding to reader complaints. One of the *Times's* key problems was an automated response system that only allowed concerned readers to talk to a machine. In order to maintain a good relationship with the public, newspapers need to be able to talk to a human being.

Fact-checking is an integral part of journalism and every major publication should have a fact-checking system in place. Furthermore, a proper fact-checking system has to rely on more than the reporter's own notes to verify its truthfulness. Given the vast quantities of information available on the Internet as well as print sources, there is no excuse for a piece like "Hack Heaven" to get through.

An ethical analysis also gives clear view about toe-touching and the "hidden army." Toe-touching is a damaging and unethical practice and should not be tolerated. Writers, even freelancers and interns, should be credited with a byline for their work.

The Blair and Cooke cases also showed the danger of working with anonymous sources. In both cases, these anonymous sources were never identified to editors; had they been, the *Post* and the *Times* could have saved themselves a lot of embarrassment. To avoid such scandal, anonymous sources should be identified to the editors beforehand.

Jayson Blair, a substandard reporter, was kept at the New York Times and even promoted several times, despite numerous warnings about his work, because of Howell Raines's unilateral decisions. To avoid keeping a suspect worker from rising through the ranks despite obvious problems, the hiring and promotion process should be set up to

support careful consideration of employees' strengths and qualifications, and it should take input from more than one person.

Above all, editors must keep in mind at all times that their reporters do, in fact, make mistakes, and that any criticism of their reporting should be addressed rather than ignored. If editors are unwilling or unable to dignify the possibility of error in completely fraudulent stories, they will certainly not consider possible issues in stories where the reporting is merely lazy or sloppy. The cases of Cooke, Glass, and Blair are the extreme cases which expose the cracks through which smaller problems can pass without detection.

APPENDIX I

The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics

Preamble

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

Seek Truth and Report It

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.

- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

Minimize Harm

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

Act Independently

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

Be Accountable

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.

Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

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